

EAR INFECTION, OUTER

(Otitis Externa; Swimmer's Ear)



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

Inflammation or infection of the ear canal that extends from the eardrum to the outside.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Ear pain that worsens when the earlobe is pulled.
- Itching in the ear.
- Slight fever (sometimes).
- Discharge of pus from the ear.
- Temporary loss of hearing on the affected side.
- A small painful lump or boil in the ear canal.

CAUSES

- Bacterial or fungal infection of the delicate skin lining of the ear canal.
- Injury to the ear canal.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Swimming in dirty, polluted water.
- Excessive swimming in chlorinated pools. Chlorinated water dries out the ear canal, allowing bacteria or fungi to enter the skin.
- Excess moisture from any cause.
- Irritation from swabs; metal objects, such as bobby pins; or ear plugs, especially if they are left in a long time.
- Inadequate production of protective ear wax (cerumen).
- Previous ear infections.
- Skin allergies.
- Diabetes mellitus or other disorders that predispose to infection.
- Use of hair spray or hair dye that may enter the ear canal.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Don't clean your ears with any object or chemical.
- After you have had otitis externa, keep the prescription ear drops on hand. If the ear canals get wet for any reason, such as swimming or shampooing, put drops in both ears at bedtime.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Usually curable with treatment in 7 to 10 days.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Severe pain.
- Chronic inflammation that is difficult to cure.
- A boil in the ear canal.
- Cellulitis (deep-tissue infection).



TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Diagnosis is usually made by examination of the ear. Fluid from the ear may be cultured.
- Treatment usually involves medication and supportive care to relieve pain.
- Gentle cleaning of the ear canal; remember that a small amount of ear wax helps protect against infection.
- Warm compress over the ear may help relieve the pain.
- Keep the infected ear dry. Wear ear plugs or shower cap for showering.

MEDICATIONS

- You may use non-prescription drugs, such as acetaminophen or aspirin, for minor pain.
- Ear drops that contain antibiotics and cortisone drugs to control inflammation and fight infection.
- Topical creams or ointments for fungal or bacterial infections.
- Oral antibiotics for severe infection.

ACTIVITY

Resume your normal activities as soon as symptoms improve. Avoid getting water in the ears for 3 weeks after all symptoms disappear. Any moisture, even from showering or washing hair, can trigger a recurrence.

DIET

No special diet.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of outer ear infection.
- The following occur during treatment:
 - Pain persists, despite treatment.
 - You feel your ears need cleaning.